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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT2672, LEBANON: PM SINIORA PLANS COUNTER-PUNCH (BUT,

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT2672	2006-08-16 16:53	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Beirut

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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5109
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002672

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/SINGH/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/16/2016
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA PLANS COUNTER-PUNCH (BUT,
ALAS, NOT A KNOCK-OUT ONE) TO NASRALLAH

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C/NF) In a 8/16 meeting with the Ambassador, PM Siniora stated that his number one goal at this point is to get the LAF into south Lebanon as quickly as possible. This will be a significant achievement. He discounted much of Hassan Nasrallah's recent "victory" rhetoric as simply that, and planned to address the Lebanese nation this evening to explain the peace, and exactly what the country stands to gain with implementation of UNSCR 1701. Siniora acknowledged that he's walking a tightrope with Hizballah, but he projected confidence that his approach will succeed in the long run. The Prime Minister once again asked the U.S. and the international community to give him tangible results to win the battle for Lebanese hearts and minds, and specifically, the rapid opening of the country's airport and seaports. He said that he sought German help on ports and borders (but did not specify what exactly he requested or was offered). He seeks international recognition that Shebaa will be addressed. Finally, accepting our criticism that the GOL appeared to abdicate initial reconstruction to Hizballah, PM Siniora is placing Lebanon's reconstruction effort under the leadership of Ghassan Taher, a trusted (Shia) colleague of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Prime Minister Fouad Siniora met with the Ambassador and poloff at the Grand Serail on August 16. Senior advisors Mohammad Chatta and Rola Nouraddine also attended the meeting. The Prime Minister was in better spirits than we have experienced lately. He expressed confidence that things were going relatively well. A number of Government Ministers, including Minister of Economy and Trade Sami Haddad and Minister of Finance Jihad Azour, were departing his office as we arrived.

PRIMARY MISSION: LAF DEPLOYMENT

¶3. (C/NF) PM Siniora emphasized that most of his energy now is directed toward moving the LAF quickly into positions in the south, because this action, he believes will demonstrate to the people of Lebanon that a sea change has occurred. He stated that if the Army could establish its authority in heretofore denied territory, Hizballah would have no option but to fall back. In his analysis, Hizballah could not afford a clash with Lebanese troops.

¶4. (C/NF) Referring to his almost constant communication with Speaker Nabih Berri, he stated that Hizballah had already committed itself to two necessary steps: it would turn over all of its fixed bases to the LAF, and it would have no "conspicuous, apparent presence" in south Lebanon once the army deployed. Siniora also said he had extracted a promise that no area of south Lebanon would be "out of bounds" for the LAF. (Note: For several years, UNIFIL had not been permitted to enter nor overfly certain Hizballah "training areas" in the UNIFIL area of responsibility. End note.)

¶5. (C/NF) Speaking metaphorically, Siniora said, "If I don't go to the south, Nasrallah will believe I am leaving the south for him." Siniora assured the Ambassador that his Government was asking more from Hizballah than what most observers believed. He indicated that Lebanon's army will be taking the first steps toward deployment "within a very few days" and that full deployment would be completed within three weeks. He said that he expected to secure cabinet approval later that evening for the LAF deployment, something Siniora described as a historic opportunity he did not wish to miss.

CLARIFICATION REQUESTED

¶6. (C/NF) PM Siniora complained about two issues: the mixed message he says is being put out by the UN and the lack of attention being paid to Shebaa. Siniora maintained that Geir Pedersen, Personal Representative of the UN SYG in Lebanon, had delivered a muddled message to Hizballah representatives that, according to Siniora, they "shouldn't worry" about disarmament until "the second phase." If this

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was accurate, and Siniora admitted it was second-hand information, the Prime Minister said it was making his difficult discussions with Nabih Berri that much tougher.

¶7. (C/NF) Siniora also asked exactly when the international community was going to address Shebaa in a manner that would allow his Government to use the issue as a battering ram against Nasrallah. He reiterated that if the international community, perhaps in the UN SYG's address scheduled for this Friday, would affirm that it viewed Shebaa as a legitimate issue, it would give Siniora and his pro-reform Ministers an instrument they need to crystallize the argument that it was the Government of Lebanon that achieved recognition of Shebaa through negotiations on the resolution 1701 -- and not Hizballah. The Prime Minister strongly stated, "With this issue, I can finally take Hizballah's weapons."

¶8. (C/NF) PM Siniora also addressed the deployment of "UNIFIL-plus," describing it as the essential element in empowering the LAF in its difficult mission. Describing his concept of the impending operations in the south, PM Siniora said UNIFIL should not be overly "pro-active," but should supply those capabilities the Lebanese force still lacked, especially in the fields of intelligence, communications, and transport. Once again, the Prime Minister voiced profound confidence in the commitment, ability, and loyalty of his army, but said they still required the added capabilities of a modern army. He re-emphasized that the first elements to enter former Hizballah positions and collect arms would be the LAF, not the multi-national elements of UNIFIL plus.

THWARTING NASRALLAH'S ATTEMPTED COUP D'ETAT

¶9. (C/NF) PM Siniora made clear his awareness that Hassan Nasrallah was attempting to achieve in the post-conflict phase what Hizballah could not achieve in the war, namely a virtual coup d'etat of the Government by assuming governmental responsibilities and authorities. Siniora was convening a session of his Council of Ministers that evening and said he would also address the nation in a televised speech. He intended to clearly explain what Lebanon achieved and what it suffered. Siniora said he planned to compare the costs suffered by both Lebanon and Israel -- and to make the point that if this is what "victory" looks like, who needs it.

¶10. (C/NF) From his remarks, it was clear that PM Siniora considers Hassan Nasrallah's claims of victory to be absurd, and almost obscene considering the loss of innocent life. Siniora said that the people of Lebanon may still be in shock at the violence of the conflict, but they are intelligent enough to understand the high price Nasrallah forced them to pay.

¶11. (C/NF) The Prime Minister emphasized that his goal tonight was to describe his vision of an "inclusive" state, where an empowered government fulfilled its responsibilities to all its citizens in all the country's regions.

RECONSTRUCTION

¶12. (C/NF) Faced with the enormity of the imminent reconstruction of the country, PM Siniora acknowledged that his office has too few resources to manage every aspect of

what appears will be a multi-billion effort. With regard to the significant sums of aid being pledged, especially by Arab states, PM Siniora indicated he would allow the donating states to execute various projects, as long as they adhered to the Government's overall plan.

¶13. (C/NF) He confided that in the next few days, he would appoint Ghassan Taher, a well-respected project manager who had previously worked closely with former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, in addition to possessing government experience in the airline sector. In Siniora's view, Ghassan Taher, a Shia from south Lebanon, would be accepted by both government ministers and Lebanon's sectarian communities. He also stated that Taher would be assisted in his work by the Minister of Finance and Minister of Economy and Trade. (Note: Our FSN staff describes Taher in glowing terms. End note.)

¶14. (C/NF) Siniora said he doesn't want all the promised
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aid to be forced through the "cube" of government, indicating that market forces and the international aid community may provide better efficiencies and be more agile.

BEIRUT INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT -- A SYMBOL

¶15. (C/NF) The Prime Minister ended the meeting with a renewed appeal to expedite the re-opening of Beirut International Airport, as well as the country's seaports. He argued that not only were these avenues of commerce critically important for economic recovery and the reconstruction effort, but also served as a symbol of national sovereignty.

¶16. (C/NF) He insisted that U.S. concerns about Hizballah's long-standing control of the airport were being addressed as he spoke. He asked the Ambassador to discuss the particulars with Minister of Interior Ahmed Fatfat, but that the principal improvement involved replacement of Hizballah-influenced elements of the LAF stationed at the airport with more independent (and Sunni dominated) ISF personnel.

¶17. (C/NF) In a brief meeting with Minister Fatfat afterwards, the Interior Minister confirmed that ISF General Yassir Mahmoud (Druze -- someone Walid Jumblatt told us separately could be trusted) had been selected by ISF Commander General Rifi to serve as the "president of a committee" that will supervise the security of the Beirut airport. That committee took up position today. Fatfat also indicated that Cabinet approval was not needed because the applicable Ministries of Finance, Public Works, and Defense, had already authorized the appointment. Minister Fatfat said these changes were being implemented immediately, with 120 of an eventual 400 new ISF personnel already stationed at the facility.

¶18. (C/NF) The PM expressed deep impatience with the Ambassador's suggestion that the airport be opened to passenger traffic in stages, with a possible interim step being an air bridge to Amman as security procedures were put in place. The blockade on the airport, Siniora insisted, must be lifted entirely, in order to empower the government and restore a symbol of Lebanon's sovereignty. The Ambassador asked Siniora about requesting UNIFIL or international assistance to help ensure proper security. Siniora said that he had already talked with the German Foreign Minister about this, and the Germans were positively inclined to help. (The PM interrupted the meeting to ask an aide to place a call to the Germans.) But Siniora, with a line of people waiting to see him, did not go into details on exactly what the Germans might provide. Walking the Ambassador to the door, he complained that Israel still does not understand that its measures hurt the GOL much more than

they hurt Hizballah. Hizballah can still sneak people across the Syrian border, whereas the March 14 politicians have to beg for spots on French or American helicopters, reinforcing the impression of collusion and impotence.

FELTMAN